

# Opening Doors

## A California Connected by 25 Initiative (CC25I) Update



### Breakthrough in the Breakthrough Series

By Lyssa Trujillo

*The Breakthrough Series Collaborative on Independent Living Program Transformation* has always had youth in mind as pivotal members involved in the transformation process of the deliverance of ILP services. Since the first learning session youth engagement was front and center as the essential in keeping the work youth centered. By the second learning session the concept of *Holding on to Youth versus Youth Hanging On* was introduced and well received. It sparked conversation about what it truly means to have and keep youth engaged. Their invitation to the table to partake in discussions simply was not enough. Through a series of discussions between faculty members and youth leaders it became apparent that more needed to be done. Youth engagement by itself was only one aspect of developing youth as leaders.

The concept of *Youth Engagement does not mean Youth Empowerment* was then developed and as the third learning session commenced a youth affinity group (comprised of youth leaders from counties and BSC faculty) led a series of activities. The morning began with a mock presentation on the 100 ways to engage youth, where unbeknownst audience, youth began to shout out experiences they have encountered. Such shout outs included: *"I don't understand the language: the meetings are at times when I can't go: Why am I here?"*

Teams were then split up into small groups and one member of each subgroup was blindfolded, handed a padlock, and asked to try and

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The California Connected by 25 (CC25I) Initiative is a California Family to Family strategy helping public child welfare agencies and their communities build comprehensive services and supports for transitioning foster youth.

## Breakthrough at BSC - continued

unlock it on their own. This stage was set to represent how many youth are handed the opportunity for success, but often do not have the “key” (knowledge of or influence over the system) to open and take advantage of those opportunities. On the second attempt, the blindfolded person was allowed two team members to give instructions. However, neither person giving the instruction knew what the other was instructing. This portion was to show how often there are several adults in a youth’s life who give the youth guidance individually and that sometimes their advice opposes that of others there to help the youth. The final attempt involved the group discussing how to best coordinate in order to open the lock. This last attempt represented how asking the “youth” how those individuals there to support them can better help, instruct and collaborate with each other to ensure the greatest outcome.

The faculty youth leaders then wrapped up the morning with a large group discussion. Some takeaways:

- Surprise that youth still felt excluded and that some of their actions were not enough
- Communication patterns should change with more questions and higher expectations
- Humbling experience in that just because there has been so much progress there is still so much to do and change.

The youth leaders emphasized that the ILP BSC is about change, being innovative, and importance of youth involvement and youth empowerment. Space needs to be created and sustained so that young people can give their ideas to those who have the power and influence to change outcomes and experiences for in and out of care foster youth.

## Getting Beyond the System – Socratic Approach



Paul Pitcoff from Youth Advocacy Center facilitates break out session

Sites from CC25I, Ready to Succeed, and the BCS/ILP sites gathered in January for the Youth Advocacy Center (YAC) *Getting Beyond the System (GBS)* Convening. YAC is recognized as a leading social entrepreneur founded on the belief that youth in foster care have the desire, talents, and potential to be participating citizens. The workshops focused on the GBS philosophy, approaches and practice tools that are effective in engaging youth, motivating them to actively plan and prepare for independence, and helping them develop critical thinking and decision-making skills. A special thanks to YAC founders Betsy Krebs and Paul Pitcoff, and Ann Shalof for facilitating this enlightening and thought provoking convening.

## Youth Advisory Board Survey Results

In the Fall of 2009, Heidi Sommer (UC Berkeley) and Lyssa Trujillo (CC25I) developed a survey to assess youth engagement from a Youth Advisory Board (YAB) perspective. The questions ranged from inquiring about the general structure of the boards, to successes/challenges the boards have faced, and what type of technical assistance they would like to receive. *Structure:* Most YABs are comprised of in and out of care youth with an average age range of 16-25. Mission statements reflected a desire to work as a group to positively affect change in programs and practices, for in and out of care foster youth, by way of the groups’ personal experiences and voices. *Challenges* included getting involved and being heard by CWS, the sense that adults still believe that youth do not know what is best for them, funding issues, and recruitment and retention. *Technical Assistance* was desired around youth leadership training, youth retention, public speaking skills, interaction with other YABs, and presentations by other former foster youth.

Lyssa Trujillo will devote 2010 to working with each of our respective YABS and providing technical assistance on an individual site-by-site basis. Lyssa will also provide opportunities in the for sites to learn from each other through peer to peer learning forums in an effort to promote promising and best practices around youth engagement and empowerment across all of our CC25I sites.

## County Highlights: Youth Leadership Approaches from CC25I Sites

**Fresno:** The THP+ program has developed different projects to give current THP+ participants an opportunity to excel in youth mentorship and advocacy. Foster youth will be paired with THP+ participants so that the THP+ youth can assist or guide current foster youth through their emancipation process. Fresno is also identifying THP+ participants to be community representatives for TDM meetings. The THP+ participants serve as advocates for youth during the meetings. Forums have been established for THP+ participants to speak with care providers about their experience in the foster care system in an effort to educate as to the needs of foster youth. Youth Organizing New Ideas (YONI) Youth Leadership Board was established in July 2007. Membership has stayed consistent and the board gathers bi-monthly.

**Glenn:** Active steps have been taken to involve youth in their own case planning through the planning and facilitating of their own emancipation conferences. The youth identifies and invites participants and then facilitates the meeting. Meetings have included the youth's family, foster family, friends, teachers and service providers.

**Humboldt:** The Humboldt County Transition Age Youth Collaboration (HCTAYC) is the vehicle through which youth have the opportunity to gain skills, knowledge, and experience to engage in systems improvement. Over the last year HCTAYC has offered three Leadership Trainings: Understanding and Forming Policy, Meeting Facilitation Skills, and Public Speaking. These initial trainings laid some of the foundation for youth leadership and involvement in the county systems. HCTAYC has continued to promote youth leadership and empowerment by supporting youth to attend and present at both local and statewide conferences. Youth have presented on topics including mental health, foster care, independent living skills, and education for foster youth. There is an ongoing effort to identify committees and workgroups throughout Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) where youth can participate. This last year youth members have participated in the Mental Health Services Act Implementation teams, the Mental Health Board, the Child Welfare System Improvement Plan team, the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Commission, CC25I educational meetings, and various other meetings and committees throughout the Department of Health and Human Services. Humboldt's Youth Advisory Board presented at the local Beyond the Bench Conference and focused on educating professionals about genuine commitment to youth engagement and creating an environment that encourages and respects youth voice in decision-making.

**Orange:** On December 1, 2009, three former foster youth addressed 180 Children and Family Services Supervisors and Managers for 90 minutes in Orange County's Quarterly Leadership Meeting. The three youth described unique experiences in foster care; one was adopted very young but came back to foster care after the death of the adoptive parent, one was in relative foster home with an uncle, and the third was in a Multi-dimensional Treatment Foster Care placement. Each of the youth also described discrete housing experiences as former foster youth with Guardian Scholar, Host Family, and Single Site THP+ facilities. They bravely and honestly described the services that they wished they had received while in foster care. A young mother among them shared her struggles as a full-time student and part-time employee, and stated that if she had received more information about youth sexuality, she would have prepared herself better and waited to become a mother until she completed her university studies. Each of the youth expressed a wish that they had received more support in the completion of their TILP and Transitional Planning Conference goals. Other recommendations from the youth for programmatic change are captured in the following list sent by the Children and Family Services Director to all Managers and Supervisors with the charge to develop procedures that would eliminate problems such as inadequate information as to what is really happening in the court process at the time of removal, the TILP not being sufficiently used as a decision making/planning tool, and the Transition Planning Conferences being ineffective because youth are left on their own to complete tasks. Five former foster youth have been hired as part time-Educational Liaison Assistants with the Foster Youth Services team. Three other former foster youth are providing specialized ILP workshops in the group home facilities, to assure that the foster youth residing there will be able to put into practice the information presented in the workshop sessions.

## County Highlights: Youth Leadership Approaches (Continued)

**Santa Clara:** Santa Clara County's Youth Advisory Board (YAB) has been in place since late 2005. YAB is youth driven and staff supported; it is a means to include the perspectives of both youth and young adults served by SFCS in the decisions that impact youth. The members of the YAB consist of both current and former foster and probation youth up to 25 years of age. DFCS supports the growth of YAB by providing training and mentorship toward professional development for those youth elected to officer positions. Training and mentorship includes preparation for public speaking, meeting protocol, and interpersonal communication in an effort to develop confidence, skills, and self esteem. Officers and members of YAB are youth leaders and valued for their input and participation. Independent Living Program (ILP) makes every attempt to hire former foster youth as Case Aides to support the efforts of Case Managers and recruitment of ILP eligible foster youth. Having former foster youth involved with direct services to current ILP participants lends itself to creating natural role models for those participating in ILP, and empowering those who have completed ILP participation. Youth see that the experience one has with the "system" is valued and an asset that can be used for employment purposes, to motivate others, and to serve as a leader. Two former foster youth are active participants in the Breakthrough Collaborative (BSC) on ILP redesign. Santa Clara wants to ensure that the youth voice is heard, and that the community knows the importance of including youth in the decision making process. The youth on the BSC team are empowered as they know their opinions and contributions are valued and they are equal members of the process. Youth have commented that they feel they are able to "give back" when they use their experience to support and encourage other foster youth or educate staff and adult supporters. Using their experience to their advantage, both personally and professionally, youth have been empowered to find the positive in their foster care experience. DFCS is committed to the idea that these are our leaders of tomorrow and values the participation and partnership of youth.

**San Francisco:** The San Francisco Youth Advisory Board meets every other week. They have been very active in recruitment of foster youth and caregivers to all SF ILSP events. They were instrumental in planning the last ILSP Mixer and resource sharing events. These events target foster youth, caregivers, social workers, and community Based Organizations. The youth were responsible for the icebreakers for the adult section for both events, and also facilitated the youth panel presentations at both events. The youth met and planned the events, the activities, prizes and games. They made all the phone calls to the youth and their caregivers to invite them to the event. This took over two weeks, and as a result ILSP had one of the largest group of attendees to the last mixer. From the evaluation, the attendees thought the youth panel was the most impressive and informative they had participated in. The Youth Advisory Board also conducts outreach to group homes, youth on their school campuses and other youth events to increase awareness of the ILSP services available to not only the foster youth but their caregivers as well.

**Solano:** Solano County has recently hired an emancipated foster youth who is a THP+ participant to work in a number of capacities. For the past year she has participated in various ILP BSC convening's on the Solano County team, co-facilitated the Solano Youth Action Team as well as Life Conferences, and accompanied the ILP Coordinator at countywide workgroups to provide youth perspective. The Youth Action Team is utilized by the County to obtain youth input for a variety of different purposes that are related to Solano County's mission to promote youth voice and leadership. A county goal is to have the Youth Action Team completely facilitated by youth.

**Stanislaus:** In an effort to encourage youth engagement Stanislaus County ILP formed the Youth Advisory Committee in mid 2009. The purpose of YAC is to provide ILP youth with leadership skills. YAC members are active members of the ILP program and meet on a bi-weekly basis. Each meeting begins with a team building activity that is designed to teach and build on the leadership qualities of the group. Current YAC activities include fund raising, facilitation of ILP trainings, and active participation in community service throughout the county. In 2009 the YAC attended the National Teen Leadership Conference in Sacramento and members are planning on attending the 2010 conference as well.



## Youth Leadership at CalSWEC: Solanje Rochell

Solanje Rochell is a 25-year old former foster youth with a passion for diversity, foster youth culture, and empowerment. Solanje currently works for the California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC) as a Data Specialist. Solanje also actively promotes youth voice and leadership in both CC25I and Ready to Succeed initiatives. Her work experience around youth engagement started at the Stanislaus County Community Services Agency as a Visitation Aide and later on becoming and Independent Living Skills caseworker. Solange has five years of experience working with the California Youth Connection (CYC) as a member and trainer and over three years of experience working as a youth trainer and staff member with YOUTH Training Project. Solanje is a graduate of Cal State University of Stanislaus with a Bachelor's degree in Sociology and plans to pursue a Master's in Public Health in the near future.

*"I feel that youth engagement is a link both directly and indirectly to youth empowerment. Youth have experience that is invaluable and a passion that is noteworthy. We should be involved not only in matters that affect us directly, but in matters that affect the lives of many youth who do not have a voice in decisions that are being made about them. I will continue to work on educating people on the importance of youth engagement and empowerment."*



Contact Solanje at 510.642.9354, or  
[solanje@berkeley.edu](mailto:solanje@berkeley.edu)

### Save the Date: Regional Youth Engagement and Empowerment Convenings

With support provided by the California Department of Social Services, the Family to Family, California Connected by 25 and Ready to Succeed Initiatives are working with UC Davis to provide a full day regional convening:

**April 13<sup>th</sup>** (Southern Counties) Location: Orange, CA.

**June 29<sup>th</sup>** (Northern Counties) Location: Sacramento, CA.

The regional convenings will focus on youth engagement and empowerment strategies that are relevant across our various initiatives and efforts. We hope the dates and locations will work for your county team. Registration and other logistical details will be handled by UC-Davis and distributed as soon as possible. In the meanwhile, please save the dates.

### Save the Date: ILP Institute

The Independent Living Program (ILP) Institute is coming!

**May 5<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> in Sacramento**

The theme will be "Seasons of Change" and will highlight exciting models of ILP Transformation and share innovative practices across the state. There will be

a special emphasis on practices that provide individualized attention and real world connections for youth, utilize resources and services that are based in the youth's home, school and community, and focus in an integrated way on the youth's permanency, education and employment and career goals. Counties will form teams of 4 to 6 to attend the Institute together and work on practice changes in their county. Teams will include important perspectives and expertise, including child welfare staff (social worker/supervisor), a caregiver (foster or kinship provider), a youth (current or former foster youth) and community partners (this may be ILP provider, probation, education, mental health or employment partners).

***Travel and lodging expenses will be reimbursed!***

More details coming soon so stay tuned and start developing your local team ***NOW!***

#### Contact Us:

James Anderson, Project Manager – CC25I  
[jamesanderson.cc25i@gmail.com](mailto:jamesanderson.cc25i@gmail.com) or 408.916.7479

Lyssa Trujillo, Youth Alumni Technical Assistant  
[ltrujillo.cc25i@gmail.com](mailto:ltrujillo.cc25i@gmail.com) or 408.656.6673